

REVIEW OF *THE ROUTLEDGE GUIDEBOOK TO PAINE'S RIGHTS OF MAN*

by Frances A. Chiu, PhD

Reviewed by Edward J. Dodson, MLA / October, 2020

Historian Frances A. Chiu has produced a work that takes the reader inside the times that inspired Thomas Paine to challenge the legitimacy of Old World systems of hierarchy and privilege.

Anyone who has not read Paine's *Rights of Man* (or not read it for some years) will benefit enormously by first reading this guidebook.

As a long-time student of Thomas Paine's life and his contributions to our understanding of what constitutes just principles of governance, I found much in this guidebook that provided valuable context to the positions expressed by Paine on the important issues of his day and those that continue to haunt us in our own time. As Frances Chiu explains in the introduction:

"[T]his Routledge Guide aims to explicate, first and foremost, the arguments presented in the text itself while showing how Paine's conceptualizations of rights, representative government, and inequality fit into the broader trajectory of liberal and progressive thought in Britain, America, and France."

As I suspect Paine would agree, the times that tried men's souls never really ended. They have a long, long history that nurtured Paine's intellectual curiosity and contributed to the person Paine became. What Frances Chiu details are the many direct and indirect influences that found their way into Paine's writing. He questioned all authority and relied on his own ability to think and reason to identify common sense solutions to what troubled humankind. As Chiu notes, Paine was drawn to the longstanding *ought* questions of philosophical inquiry:

"This concept of rights, however, has a much longer history, going back at least six centuries when the idea of a natural law (e.g., all men and living creatures endeavor to sustain themselves) eventually gave rise to the idea of a natural right (e.g., all men and living creatures have a right to sustain themselves) in texts on canonic laws."

To Paine, the people of every society were engaged in a desperate struggle to realize what were their natural rights. As an Englishman, Paine cherished his own nation's tradition of dissent and rebellion, imperfect in intent and outcome as this was. "For Paine," writes Chiu, "it was the uprising of 1381 rather than the Magna Charta [1215] that warranted greater admiration."

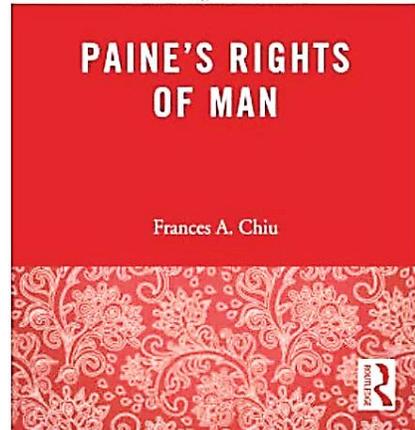
And, for good reason. Rather than the beginning of participatory governance, Magna Charta transferred power from the monarchy to aristocratic land barons interested in aggrandizement of their own privileges. Paine immersed himself in a quest to discover first principles, envisioning what life could be like for the disinherited if only the people of every nation were governed by just law, justly enforced.

Paine had observed throughout his early life the severe deprivation experienced by Britain's peasant population caused by landed privilege. Chiu introduces (or reintroduces) readers to both well-known and obscure proponents of systemic reform who to some extent shared the outrage conveyed by Paine in *Rights of Man* and, later, in *Agrarian Justice*.

Paine comes across in this guide as a person of sincere, if imperfect, heroic character. He was a visionary and an



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optimist, which led him to underestimate the staying power of entrenched privilege even when confronted by united opposition. One must remember that *Rights of Man* is written before Paine's disillusionment with George Washington's leadership and the Hamiltonian influence over the institutional development of the American republic has taken hold. He had not yet watched as the French liberals he admired were pushed aside by the Jacobins, imprisoned and so frequently executed. His later writings seem to be directed to distant future generations rather than to his contemporaries.

Frances Chiu speculates to what extent the main French intellectuals influenced Paine's thinking. Although she concludes that "Turgot and the Physiocrats ... are viewed as half-hearted economists more interested in 'the administration of the government rather than the government itself,'" I think it is worth remembering that the one person who could be described as mentor to Paine was Benjamin Franklin, and Franklin thoroughly embraced the teachings of Quesnay and Turgot. Perhaps we can thank Franklin, then, for the extent to which *Agrarian Justice* is physiocratic. And yet, as explained by Chiu, Paine demanded far deeper systemic and progressive changes than almost anyone one might cite. Quoting Paine, she notes that he drew "attention to the ironic lack of civilized progress in the supposed 'Old World' countries."

Many pages of my copy of this guidebook have passages highlighted for later reference. I will shortly do what I hope and expect others will do after reading this guidebook – read *Rights of Man* with new insight into the power of Thomas

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Paine's remarkable intellect and moral principles. I leave Frances Chiu with the last few words on what *Rights of Man* has to say to us today:

Frances A. Chiu, a TPF Board of Directors member, is a scholar of 18th-19th century English literature, and teacher of history and literature at the New School University in New York City where she created a course, "The Age of Paine", probably the first specifically on Paine. She holds degrees from Smith College (BA), Northwestern University (MA), and Oxford University (PhD). She has published monographs on 18th-century horror novelist Ann Radcliffe and on *La Fanu*, also articles in professional journals as well as reviews and popular pieces.

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"Paine's words ring true again when we consider the lack of overall happiness in his adopted country and other parts of the world where inequality has become a looming issue, especially where the misdeeds and crimes of the 0.01% go largely unpunished."

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MORE about *The Routledge Guidebook to Paine's Rights of Man*

Watch for an absorbing dialogue with Ed Dodson and Frances Chiu on **SMARTTALK**, a video program of the Henry George School of Social Science. A date has not been announced yet, but it will be ready soon at, <http://www.hgsss.org/smart-talk/> Check the website from time to time in the near future to find this engaging discussion.



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Thomas Paine taught us, "**Reason obeys itself, and ignorance submits to whatever is dictated to it.**" (*Rights of Man*) * FLVCS stands for reason and common sense in the tradition of Paine and the other Founders.

We are sometimes criticized as partisan and "leftists" because we use common sense to point out that President Trump is a threat to our democracy. [But] we say we are conservative in the sense of following the Constitution and rule of law.

In any event, we stand by our principles without regard to whether they are 'left' or 'right.' Our positions are set out clearly on our website, such as recognizing climate change as a national security threat. Some would say our position makes us leftist. Of course, if that were correct, the Pentagon would be a

* *Four additional Paine maxims relating to Ignorance, Reason, Truth* (selected by Martha Spiegelman)

"But such is the irresistible nature of truth, that all it asks, and all it wants, is the liberty of appearing." (*The Age of Reason*)

"Ignorance is of a peculiar nature: once dispelled, it is impossible to re-establish it. ...though man may be kept ignorant, he cannot be *made* ignorant." (*The Age of Reason*)

"The mind, in discovering truth, acts in the same manner as it acts through the eye in discovering objects: when once any object has been seen, it is impossible to put the mind back to the same condition it was in before it saw it." (*The Age of Reason*)

"The mind, once enlightened, cannot again become dark." (*Rights of Man*)

leftist outfit too because it agrees with us. The President claims climate change is a hoax and denigrates those who want to mitigate the harm.

It doesn't matter to us if our positions fall to the 'left' or 'right.' We stand for what we believe is the best course for America. [W]e were criticized by Democrats when we spoke out against President Obama's surge in Afghanistan--we viewed that as a waste of blood and treasure and unlikely to accomplish much. History confirms we were correct. Also, we're confident that history will show our recent critiques to be correct too.

We encourage Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, Greens, and Independents to join us in supporting the Constitution and building a better America.

Sent by Gene Jones, TPF Board member, Secretary of FLVCS
---adapted from flvcs website, Sept 2020

